



Book review

David I. Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews: The Vatican's Rome in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism*. New York: Knopf, 2001.

In 1968, concluding an essay in the new *Acta Sanctorum*¹ that attempts to clarify for once and for all the sanctity of the later twelfth century Richard of Pontoise, allegedly martyred by the Jews, Gerard Mathon of the Catholic University of Lille took an ostensibly ambivalent position. It was premature, Mathon wrote, to make a final determination; more scholarly essays were still needed, for example, ones like that of Elphège Vacandard. Mathon's apparent ambivalence was not unique. About ritualmurder, others, too, hesitated to say simply yes or no, for instance, F. Lazenby in the 1968 *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, this time writing about Simonino of Trent, who was murdered in 1475.² The jury was still out, as though there was a possibility, however remote, that ritual murder accusations, blood libels, and host desecration libels were true. In his new *The Popes Against the Jews*, David Kertzer makes it abundantly clear that at the turn of the twentieth century, many in the Catholic Church indeed did believe in the truth of these libels, in every detail.

Paradoxically, Kertzer was able to make his case thanks to the good offices of the Catholic Church itself, because the archives of the Holy Office in Rome have at last been opened. These archives are limited. Anyone thinking that the secrets of the Catholic Church as it confronted Jews and heretics, especially Lutherans, are there for the finding, like blackberries on a bush in August, is mistaken. The material is apparently less than hoped for. It is not grouped nicely together, not yet anyway. It also dates principally from later periods, the eighteenth century and onward. Picking through it is a major task, but one Kertzer deftly accomplishes. Kertzer acknowledges the help of archivists and Roman scholars like Marina Caffiero, and in his own words he "stands on the shoulders" of Giovanni Miccoli, whose book length essay, "Santa Sede, questione ebraica e antisemitismo fra Otto e Novecento," in volume two of Vivanti's, *Gli ebrei di Italia*, is this latter work's stellar essay. But whereas Miccoli concentrates heavily on the diplomatic issues,

Kertzer probes the reactions the various libels spawned and reflected; and in doing so, he probes deeply into the identification of “modernity” with Judaism, and of the Church with anti-Semitic teachings, the very teachings, and their nexus with Catholicism that the Vatican statement on the Shoah, *We Remember*, forcefully and repeatedly denies.

No doubt the impetus to write this work, which makes the material it has unearthed available to a wide English-reading audience, came when Kertzer was preparing his marvelous feat of sleuthing, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara* (Knopf, 1997). Who would not be taken by the stance of Pius IX, willing to sacrifice the Papal States on the altar of what this pope believed was religious truth, a stance contrary to the normal pragmatism, as Paolo Prodi has described it in *The Papal Prince*, that steered the governance of the Papal States? This was, of course, the same pope, who, in *Quanta cura Syllabus* of March 18, 1861, and citing his predecessor Gregory XVI said that the idea of freedom of conscience as an inherent right of man was craziness: “[un] delirio [dire che] la libertà di coscienza e dei culti essere un diritto proprio di ciascun uomo” This claim repeats in the compilation known as the *Syllabus of Errors* of 1864, which is found in at least twenty versions and in four languages on the internet. In 1864, the arguments against this position made by Roger Williams more than two hundred years earlier – saying that the right of religious preference was in fact the will of God, hence, not to be regulated by man – seem to have mattered little; Williams had been preceded by the Jewish physician David de Pomis, whose *Ennaratio apologica* speaks of religion as a matter of individual choice as early as 1588.⁴ Maintaining, therefore, a stricter than medieval, indeed, a typically early modern, stance toward religious freedom, it is no wonder that both Pope Gregory and Pope Pius went to the barricades in restricting Jews while everywhere else Jews were achieving full citizenship. Sad to say, even today, the argument against freedom of conscience generates support, for instance, on Holywar.org, a particularly vicious website.

Kertzer has dug deeply into newspapers like the *Osservatore Romano* and the Jesuit organ, under papal supervision, *Civiltà cattolica*, which made propagating the blood libel into a campaign. Kertzer, as said, is out to show how the Church, the papally headed and directed Church, bears responsibility and was at least a major promoter of modern anti-Semitism, not only of theories of Jews seeking world dominance and of Jews murdering Christians as an act of Jewish faith, but also of racial anti-Semitism. Indeed, some of the essays in the journals mentioned above were adamant that conversion could not entirely

wash away the stain of being a Jew, continuing a debate within the Church that had begun in the Middle Ages, but which had achieved passionate expression in the fifteenth century and the times of the Spanish Inquisition, premised as that institution was on tracking down alleged convert-infidelity and linked, as well, to the laws of *limpieza de sangre*, the laws of purity of blood, which prohibited so called New Christians (converts after 1391) from assuming high rank. The Jesuit order maintained its rules about purity of descent until *after* the Second World War.

The popes never openly supported racism or the notion that baptism did not truly create a “new man.” But privately and indirectly, Kertzer argues, they supported the racism that was featured repeatedly in essays appearing in papally supervised periodicals and newspapers. The crowning point was the refusal to republish denials of ritual murder charges issued by various medieval popes. The claim – accepted by papal Secretary of State, the Spanish (and Englishly educated) Cardinal Rafael Merry del Val, who, by the way, touted himself as a descendent of the child Domenico allegedly crucified by Jews in 1250 – was that these medieval denials were ad hoc, referring to specific allegations, not regarding the accusation in general. All of this opens the way to the charges laid at the feet of Papa Pacelli, Pius XII, of not defending Jews, not sufficiently in any case, both during the Second World War, and beforehand. In this sense, this book contributes to what has become a grand debate by giving the much-needed long-range background: to show that if Pacelli behaved as charged, he was following a long Vatican tradition. Kertzer is clear in his opening sections that he is responding to *We Remember*, on whose inadequacy the book insists.

Kertzer’s carefully reasoned claims merit a reasoned response, but it is one that may not be forthcoming. Earlier reviews of Kertzer’s book have sometimes been more passionate than accurate.⁵ There has also been negative fallout. Citing Kertzer as one of its possible sources, a revision of the existing essay on the Popes and the Jews, prepared for the soon to appear revised *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, was rejected, although such a revision was commissioned, written, and vetted by internal referees. This the present writer knows at first hand. Additionally, essays and responses have failed to understand that whatever steps Pius XII did take, there is no way to answer the charge that the pope, or papal representatives, spoke only indirectly, of suffering in general, rather than specifically and explicitly about the sufferings of the Jews. The diplomatic lingo that leans on indirect speech, saying one thing by using words that at first hearing seem to say the reverse,

was tailor made for addressing representatives of the dangerous Third Reich. And it was precisely with such subtlety that Cardinal Maglione spoke to the German Ambassador to the Holy See von Weizsäcker on October 17, 1943, the day after the mass arrests of Roman Jews, who were indeed, as Susan Zucotti bluntly puts it, being detained right under the papal window (were one or two buildings knocked down, the pope could have seen these Jews with his own eyes from a window of the papal apartments; it was that close). Maglione's words, upon reading, seem to have been even more clouded by the frequent Italian diffidence to saying anything directly for fear of offending. Only a direct and unambiguous call to release Jews, all Jews, might have had some effect – at least of saving (the historical) papal face, if, as one may imagine, it would likely have saved nothing else. The recent response to Kertzer of the *Civiltà cattolica* has been even more extreme. Were not Jews, it says, so very prominent in the Russian Revolution – threatening the Church?⁶

But what of El plège Vacandard and his study fleetingly mentioned above? As Gerard Mathon knew well, Vacandard's study of 1913 roundly censures the *Civiltà cattolica* and its ilk precisely on the issue of the blood libel.⁷ In citing Vacandard, but without stating Vacandard's position, Mathon was engaging in esoteric writing at its best. But more important, he was placing himself in line with clergy like the Belgian Jesuit Bollandists Francois Halkin and Hippolyte Delehaye, who, in 1925 – echoing, be it noted, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* produced in New York between 1910 and 1913 – called the charge of ritual murder an “*inanité*.”⁸ Delehaye and Halkin were strikingly in conflict with their seventeenth century Bollandist predecessors, those great and original historians of true and false sainthood, yet who believed ritual murder libels were true. Paradoxically, with respect to their twentieth century successors, the seventeenth century Bollandists were the spiritual ancestors of the twentieth century Italian Jesuit protagonists whom Kertzer so thoroughly unmasks. Again paradoxically, it was the investigative determination of their seventeenth century predecessors, whose example they were determined to follow, that pushed the twentieth century Bollandists to reject ritual murder. It thus seems to have been no coincidence that the scientific and scholarly hagiographical work of the modern Bollandists was being condemned by the same forces that were supporting the anti-Judaic/Semitic campaign of the *Civiltà cattolica*. There appears to have been a clear parallel between opposition to ritualmurder accusations, or the support of them, and what is commonly called the struggle in the Church between modernism

and anti-modern integralism – the critical twentieth century conflict pitting conservative Catholic integralists, among whom numbered the editors and contributors to the *Civiltà cattolica*, against those seeking to bring Church teachings into line with modern reality without sacrificing cardinal Catholic beliefs. This parallel needs thorough investigation.

There was, therefore, a second side to the story that has not been sufficiently brought out. The Church had no unified position, whether among the clergy or Catholic lay intellectuals, on approaching the Jews. The detractors Kertzer so eloquently describes had their opponents, deniers, like Delehaye, of blood libels and other accusations; yet these deniers were just as often at theological and intellectual war with the “detractors” over purely Catholic issues. Delehaye, most notably, was at daggers with Cardinal Merry del Val (mentioned above) over Delehaye’s methodological treatise on debunking false saints, his classic *Les légendes hagiographiques* (1903, 1905, and 1927), which almost ended on the Index of Prohibited Books, and also over his *Les origines du culte des martyrs* (1912, and 1933). The German theologian (and priest, although one who had given up his sacramental functions) Ignaz Doellinger, too, endangered his reputation in 1881, as political anti-Semitism blossomed in Western Europe, for writing that Christian persecution was responsible for the Jewish lot.⁹ Alongside Delehaye and Doellinger there were others, scholars like Felix Vernet and the Dutch Jesuit Petrus Browe.¹⁰ Those who opposed the slander of Jews were not few.

The question, then, is why this group has not been the dominant one. Why were its members, but not others in the Church, able to overcome notions that go back to the period of Christian origins, notions that appear so clearly in the writings of the eighth century Agobard of Lyons, are rooted in the Pauline doctrine of the exclusivity of the Christian altar as expounded in I Corinthians 10:16, and are codified in Roman law, perhaps most notably in the Theodosian Code’s law (repeated in the Visigothic Code and its later epitomes) *Christianorum ad aras*, which lumps together as a threat those who frequent pagan and Jewish *convivia* – notions, therefore, which hold that unsegregated Jews had the power to pollute and corrupt the Christian altar and, hence, that altar’s greater embodiment, Christian society itself? It was to prevent just this pollution that Pius IX and Leo XIII so vainly demanded that segregation be reinstated, that, in the words of Pius IX, an end be put to the “Jews barking through Rome’s streets,” even after the ghetto (of Rome) was dissolved in 1870. With their *pericolosa familiarità*, said

Giovanni Oreglia, one of Kertzer's anti-heroes, Jews polluted Christian ritual and society.¹¹

In 1928, Kertzer tells us, the Vatican suppressed the "Friends of Israel," an organization of Catholic clergy, including Cardinals. Its activities, stated the Inquisition, order of suppression: "embraced 'a manner of acting and thinking contrary to the opinion and spirit of the Church.'" Toward resolving this enormous conundrum, of why some, as late as the twentieth century, have denounced the Jews, while others denounced the denouncers, Kertzer has provided us with a challenging and highly informed foundation.

Notes

1. Gerard Mathon, "Richard of Pontoise," *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* (Rome, 1968), 11, 170.
2. F. D. Lazenby, *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 1967), 13, 226.
3. (Turin, 1996), 2, 1371–1574.
4. (Venice, 1588), 80.
5. See most recently Ron Rychlak. "Spins of Omission, A Review of *The Popes Against the Jews*," *Crisis Magazine*, The Morley Institute Inc., Oct. 5, 2002.
6. No. 3650 del 20 luglio 2002 (Civ. Catt. 2002 III 107-210; numero 14 del 2002).
7. Elphège Vacandard, "La question du meurtre rituel chez le Juif," in *Etudes de critique et d'histoire religieuse*, 2nd ed., 3d. séries (Paris, 1912), 311–377.
8. Delehaye and Halkin were writing from Leuven/Louvain, in the *Analecta Bollandiana* 43 (1925), 211 e 44 (1926), 183.
9. Ignaz Doellinger, *Die Juden in Europa* (Berlin, 1921, Philo Verlag); on which, see Jacques Kornberg, "Ignaz von Doellinger's *Die Juden in Europa*: A Catholic Polemic against Antisemitism," *Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 6 (1999), 223–245.
10. Félix Vernet, "Juifs et Chrétiens," in *Dictionnaire Apologetique de la foi Catholique II* (Paris, 1910–1912), cols. 1651–1764, and esp. 1706; Petrus Browe, "Die Hostienschandungen der Juden im Mittelalter," *Römische Quartalschrift* 34 (1938), 167–197.
11. On Oreglia and those like him, see Thomasso Calò, "Antisemitismo e culto dei santi in età contemporanea: il caso del beato Lorenzino da Marostica," in ed., Paolo Golinelli, *Il pubblico dei santi, forme e livelli di ricezione dei messaggi agiografici* (Rome, 2000), 421, 427, 412, in that order.

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